osmosis

Stephanie Barlow

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by
Stephanie Barlow
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Herron School of Art & Design
IUPUI
Indiana University

Director of Graduate Programs and
Associate Professor Andrew Winship
Advisor

Assistant Professor Danielle Riede
Committee Member

Chancellor's Professor Dr. Jean Robertson
Committee Member

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Valerie Eickmeier
Dean of Herron School of Art & Design

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Artist statement

My artwork explores the relationship between natural phenomena and the changes in our daily life by focusing on the fragility and impermanence of the world we are a part of. Whether I am observing the waxing and waning of the moon in the sky above or documenting the movement of a shadow throughout the day, I look to everyday changes in my surroundings to understand our relationship to this constantly evolving world.

My current body of work is process and research driven. Inspiration for these investigations has been everything from the uncontrolled element of chance, to the observation of subtle movements over time, to records of indexical marks. I am investigating these moments of continual change through printmaking, drawing, sculpture and installation. I attempt to find a deeper meaning in this constant flux while trying to embrace the changes in my own life as they continue to unfold.

Personal history: Childhood wonderment

My story begins in the landscape of Utah, a place where geological features are diverse with an amazing variety of forms and colors. Elevations here rise and fall dramatically, taking forms of snow-capped mountains, high plateaus, deep canyons and vast deserts. I had immediate access to this environment growing up, and spent the greater part of my childhood outdoors investigating and observing my natural surroundings. During the summers of my youth I remember taking family road trips to the surrounding national parks, where we would camp and hike. I treasure several

photographs of my two sisters and me standing in front of some of the scenic backdrops that we encountered.

Utah's natural history was clearly visible in the landscape while I was growing up—a history that continued to change over billions of years, revealing stories of Utah's distant past. In the mountains just behind my childhood home my friends and I would climb a giant boulder we called 'sheep rock' that was deposited there by a former glacier. In those same mountains I used to look for rocks that were embedded with shells and coral, to add to my collection; the bits and pieces left by a prehistoric lake that once covered the entire region. A few blocks from my home in southern Utah I could place my hands on pristine fossils that told the prehistoric legend of a time when dinosaurs roamed the area. While hiking through sandstone cliffs I discovered Indian petroglyphs left by the region's first people, scattered across the rocks. In Kolob Canyon, a few miles south of where I attended university, I found ancient lava flows that have long since cooled into black rock that can be seen spilling across the landscape. These astonishing discoveries and stories into the grandeur and subtleties of the geological past fascinated me.

Personal philosophy: We change too

The connection I experienced with the world's geological past played a large role in the development of my personal philosophy. Because of this personal connection, I see the world as an open system, subject to constant re-configuration. Seasons come and go, day fades into night, death follows birth — these are all parts of a larger interconnected system of ongoing processes of transformation, one that we are a part of.

Just as the present-day record of geological time was built over billions of years, we have our own intimate stories and traces of personal history that develop over our lifetime.

As much as I loved watching and learning about the changes in my environment, enduring personal change was a hard concept for my younger self to grasp. I had this mentality that personal change only brought uncertainty and discomfort. I was a child drawn to regularity and held onto anything I knew as familiar. Because of this I fought personal change. Life's big transitions were always a struggle for me; they usually meant I had to take on new responsibilities, something that was difficult for me.

Once I realized these transitions were a part of life, I gave up the fruitless battle and decided the next best thing was to try and accept the fleeting nature of reality, understanding that we as humans cannot exist as static people. My new aim was to embrace change as it unfolds, rather than attaching myself to fixed ideas of who I thought I was.

This brings me to my transition into graduate school at Herron. I used to keep a large box stored under my bed full of work I completed during the four years of my undergraduate studies. One day during my first semester of graduate school, while in my apartment in Indianapolis, I thought to myself: "Why am I keeping this stuff?" The contents of the box weighed heavily on the type of artist I assumed I was, an artist I no longer felt a connection to. I was not pleased with the work I was making in my studio at the time. I felt bogged down with the conflict between who I had been and who I needed to become. I was ready to move on and change my focus.

So during the first year of my graduate studies I decided to set fire to my undergraduate work. The collection was an assortment of prints and drawings on paper with a few paintings. The paper caught fire quickly. It was not long before flames grew larger and heat started emanating from its center. Everything I had in the box went into the fire. Gray smoke rose up carrying glowing ambers as I watched the work slowly turn from paper to ashes. The weight of my previous self and ways of thinking about art lifted during this time, allowing me the breathing room to explore a new direction in my art practice. This abrupt act was not intended to be destructive; rather I was giving myself permission to work beyond what I knew in order to explore what was unfamiliar.

Process and materials: Experimenting in the studio

My process of art-making developed into one of inquiry and experimentation with new materials and methods of working. I explored the use of everyday materials found in my surroundings, such as salt, string, seeds, iron oxide, charcoal and coffee. I worked intuitively, allowing the work to unfold without any preconceived outcome, an approach I had not utilized in the past. My work became less grounded in recognizable imagery and evolved quickly toward abstraction. The first work that came from these initial experiments was *Salt Studies: Exploring Nature's Flux* (2012) [images 1-4], a small installation that was shown in a group exhibition at Herron.

This installation started with everyday objects coated in a salt solution and arranged on shelves. The objects included a pencil resting across a small metal cup, two teabags propped up by straight pins and a long red string dangling inside a slender glass jar. Over the length of the exhibition the salt solution evaporated and fragile

crystals progressively grew from the objects. Slowly salt started to spill from the metal cup, travel across the pencil, engulf the teabags and attempt to climb the string dangling inside the jar. By the end of the exhibition all the objects were blooming with salt crystals. This was the first time I presented work to the public using this newly adopted method of creating. The *Salt Studies* project was a freeing experience and marked a turning point in my graduate studies.

I developed the self-confidence to continue making work with this experimental attitude. Around this time I also understood how important the process of art-making is for me. My focus was not merely on the final product but on the act and experience of making too. I realized if I remain open to the outcome of a project, rather than cling to predetermined ideas, I could uncover new possibilities. I found that creative potential could exist in the experience of making. This way of working has allowed my ideas to expand and contract, making room for failure and change.

Observations made by art historian Julia Robinson, on the way John Cage structured the framework for his course 'Experimental Composition,' a class designed to study indeterminacy in music, resonates with this way of working:

> Indeterminacy created the preconditions for a work of art (or a performance) to be arranged by an artist without the artist knowing exactly how it would turn out. So rather than composing a score note by note, so to speak, the artist developed scores that operated as templates, open to expansion in the arena of relaxation. Elements of chance were incorporated into the temporal framework so that each performance of a single score might differ greatly, far beyond the expectations of the composer. (Robinson 103)

The essential concept behind 'Experimental Compositions' lies in the ability of the artist to intentionally give up complete control of the work's outcome.

Although not foregrounded until I was in graduate school, my interest in the process of making has always been a strong element in my artistic practice and can be traced back to my early experiences in printmaking. I was first introduced to printmaking during my undergraduate studies at Southern Utah University where I received a BFA degree in studio arts with an emphasis in drawing, painting and printmaking. During this time I developed a love for printmaking and gravitated toward the intaglio printing techniques. I found myself enjoying the heavily involved step-by-step action of the medium. And I became captivated by the process: taking me from the developing stages of transferring my idea onto a copper plate, to lowering the plate into the acid bath— waiting patiently as the acid eats away at the exposed copper-- followed by the physicality of inking and wiping the plate, and finally to the excitement of rolling the plate through the press and peeling back the damp paper to reveal the results of my efforts. I was hooked, and regularly made time to work in the print shop. Later I would be accepted into a graduate program for printmaking.

Analysis of work: Two branches active/index

My work can be separated into two primary branches of investigation. One is *active work*, which gives an audience the potential to observe change as it occurs in real time, if they keep returning to the gallery. The other branch is *index* work, which provides traces or references to natural phenomena that I have observed. In both types of work the product is not fully under my artistic control and remains open to, and even encourages, unpredictable outcomes to play a role in resulting aesthetics. By employing these methods designed to record/observe nature's events I am actively collaborating

with what is usually referred to as chance. In an art of chance the aesthetic results cannot be fully anticipated and possible outcomes only predicted—chance will determine the outcome. These works lend themselves to letting go of what I know, to develop awareness for new possibilities and experiences gained through deep observation. These works reflect on time, wonderment and experimentation, thus echoing the impermanence of natural phenomena.

Change is also a condition that reveals time. The uncontrolled effects of time—a component of chance— is an intentional element in my *active* work and is made observable through the use of ephemeral materials. The *Salt Studies* discussed above is an example of *active* work. In *active* work the element of chance occurs only in the context of certain prearranged conditions and is ongoing over time. In the case of *Salt Studies,* the objects are brought together and prearranged on shelves in the gallery setting and left to succumb to the natural forces of the evaporating salt solution. After bringing the elements together and arranging them in a space, my artistic authority is left to wait. The option to watch this work change as time moves on is then available for gallery spectators and myself. The aim of *active* work is to let an audience experience a project through repeated observation so they will become aware of perceptible changes as time progresses. At the same time, this work creates a valuable focus to contemplate our own fragile existence in this constant flux.

The *index* work comes from personal experiences and observations that I have made within the changes of my environment. These works call attention to natural phenomena though chance experiments that record/document movement in the flux. The results can be understood as traces or indexes left by the activities in question.

Although the *index* works come from personal experiences, they also invite any viewers who might respond to these traces to go out and find the same phenomena to experience for themselves.

One example of *index* work is an artist book I made in 2012, *A Trace Over Time* [images 5-7]. This book is a series of small etchings that record a process of change over time. A round etching plate, a few inches in diameter, was carried in a pocket below my hip for the duration of a moon cycle, sixteen days. The plate was printed daily on thin sheets of calligraphy paper to record the markings made by the movement of my body in coordination with the moon. While the lunar crest continued to increase in the sky the prints got consecutively darker as the markings began to build up. After the moon reached its peak, I bound the prints together in a scroll-like form using aluminum rods and a variation of the piano hinge binding style. When viewed in full length the book's pages are seen together and the prints display a progression of change similar to the natural phenomenon they reference. Although it may not be as noticed, this work can also be viewed as a young child transitioning into a mature woman. I was interested in observing the transitional moments in between the moon's phases, as well as the transformative, ephemeral character found in life.

This reference to natural phenomena, which are beyond my direct control, emphasizes that we live in a dynamic and changing world. By adopting nature as a participatory creative agent in the generation of art, such works support my experimental perception of nature and curiously enhance my interpretation of the world.

Philosophical context: A different way of seeing

The eastern philosophy of Buddhism has contributed to my ways of thinking. Although I am not a Buddhist practitioner I find myself continually drawn to the philosophy. But it was not until the year following my Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Southern Utah University that I began investigating it more seriously. During this time I read many books on the topic of Eastern ways of thinking; *Zen and the Art of Archery* (Herrigel)*, The Dharma Bums* (Kerouac)*, Smile of the Buddha* (Baas),and *Tao Te Ching* (Tzu), to name a few. I discovered very quickly that the thoughts in these pages felt welcoming to the kinds of thoughts and goals I had about my own work.

In my readings I came across the term "emptiness," the idea that every object and event is *empty* of inherent self-existence, that nothing exists separately or permanently. This idea, central to the Buddhist philosophy, helped me to conceptualize the subtle processes that we engage with in the everyday world and reveal the uniqueness to each moment as they exists interdependently, in a network of relationships.

I was also attracted by the importance Buddhist philosophy placed on the act of thinking as a path to knowing. This idea challenged me to question what I knew about the world, asking me to forget my habits of perception, and thus realize things in a new light— awaken to seeing the true nature of reality. This deep kind of awareness in the art-of-observation allows me to appreciate the bare facts of existence and appreciate changes and connections present in the world.

Art Historical context: Influences and inspirations

The art historical influences in my work come, in part, from the art movements that emerged in the 1960's and 1970's, notably Earthworks, Conceptual Art, Minimalism, Light and Space Art, Fluxus and Process Art. Robert Smithson and his wife Nancy Holt are two influential artists to come from this diverse generation. This pair of artists worked directly with the natural environment to create earthworks (a term coined by Smithson) in the remote landscape of Utah, my home state. Their work can be found off the salty shores of the Great Salt Lake, where Smithson created the infamous *Spiral Jetty* and in the vast open space of the Great Basin Desert, where Holt's *Sun Tunnels* are thoughtfully positioned.

Although supplementary documents provided me with a great conceptual understanding of these two earthworks, they fell short in delivering the experience. During the summer of 2012, I had the opportunity to see both of these large works, but more importantly the opportunity to experience them. The journey to reach these earthworks, like others, takes you to the outskirts of civilization and cannot be hurried. So when I eventually arrived at each of these works separately, I was ecstatic. After being with each artwork for a while, I quickly became interested in the space around them. I soon realized the artwork was there to provide me with a reference point from which I could see more sensitively what was going on in the environment around me; they were highlighting what was already there! Each of the works offered a place for focused contemplation on the every day experiences of life— the sound of distant pelicans in the slight breeze, the taste of salt in the air, the color shifts in the sky, and the movement of shadows along the ground. Time deepens and slows, out in the open

desert. It seems so empty until you start to observe more closely. This reminded me of similar experiences I had during family road trips. I can see the effects this vast, minimalistic space has had on my aesthetics sensibilities. The experience of being in nature is just as much a part of the earthwork experience as seeing the artwork itself.

The concepts behind the earthworks got me out of my studio to observe and reengage in my natural surroundings. The aesthetic experience of seeing these works of art in nature emphasized that these are not isolated objects outside our everyday environment, but rather integrated into a conversation with it. There is dialogue being shared between artwork and nature both physically and metaphorically. Earthworks ask us to ponder and appreciate more intently the environment that we live in; gaining an understanding you can't get by just reading a textbook. The observational exposure to this work changed the way I thought about art. It led me to question where my artistic intentions really reside. Is it in the object or the thoughts and questions it provokes? I now see art as more than just an object in a gallery. Art, I believe, can also be found in the questions, feelings, and thoughts that you get from experiencing it.

Another influence is the experimental composer and artist John Cage. Since the 1950's a number of western artists have acknowledged an impact of eastern philosophy in their artistic practice. Cage was notably one of these artists and he openly accredited Zen Buddhism with playing a significant role in his art and life. One of Cage's greatest contributions to the art world was shifting the artist's focus away from the inner psyche to the artist's everyday environment. This became a way for artists to re-think the artistic purpose and re-invent the genuine act of creating. With this, Cage opened up a new range of possibilities that led to an era of experimentation in all media. His

philosophical influences are seen in wide effect across the art world, impacting various artists involved with Abstract Expressionism, Happenings, Fluxus and Performance Art (Baas).

One way that Cage re-invented the creative process, and arguably the most influential to me, was his use of chance and indeterminacy to create compositions both in his music and his art. I had the opportunity to see one of these compositions, *11 Stones 2* (1989), up-close in the Indianapolis Museum of Art's prints and drawings room (Without the interruption of glass!). The print is on a large sheet of rag paper with a plate embossment in the lower right corner containing an array of circles varying in color, shape and size. The whole print appears as if it was set on fire and stomped out before it could catch —evidence comparable to a shoe-print can be seen in the artwork. I could feel/see the raw energy in this print.

This work, along with others, was arranged in accordance with the tossing of stones and insight Cage gained from the book *I Ching* (also known as *Book of Changes*, a well-known Chinese classic text). After Cage tossed the stones using his calculated means, he traced them where they fell using several different etching techniques. The tracings resemble the *ensō* (Japanese for circle) character in Zen Calligraphy, an image I have always been drawn to.

The focus Cage placed on the aesthetic experience of chance encouraged me to incorporate chance elements in my own work. During the summer of 2012, at a lake in Michigan, I produced a series of five drawings titled *Shoreline* [images 8, 9] that incorporated the element of chance. The drawings were created by rubbing iron oxide into the fibers of a sheet of paper. Then exposed to the rhythmic movement of water

along the shoreline. The water reacted to the treated paper and produced layers of darkened lines that resemble those found on the sand. This series of drawings were both inspired and realized by the pattern of moving water along the shore. After the series of work dried they were then hung in a rhythmic pattern to mimicking the movement of their creation.

In creating this work I stepped back and let chance take the lead. Allowing the energy of the undetermined water to alter the surface of the paper. The marks left behind can be seen as a trace and considered part of the *index* branch of my work. This series of drawings became a process of looking, touching, trying things out, and discovering hidden potential. In using this method of working I become the maker in the act of creating but not the controller. The idea of chance opened me up to accepting change rather than resisting it, and has driven my art making approach to being more experimental. Cage explains, "Ideas are one thing and what happens is another."

Conclusion: MFA thesis exhibition

The more I contemplate about the changes occurring in the world around me, the more I become interested in the connections we share with them. The work in my MFA thesis exhibition exemplifies this metaphorical relationship through my abiding interest in traces, constant shifts, and progressions that occur all around us and within us; even those so commonplace we barely notice them. There are seven works in the exhibition, each taking the form of drawing, printmaking, sculpture or installation.

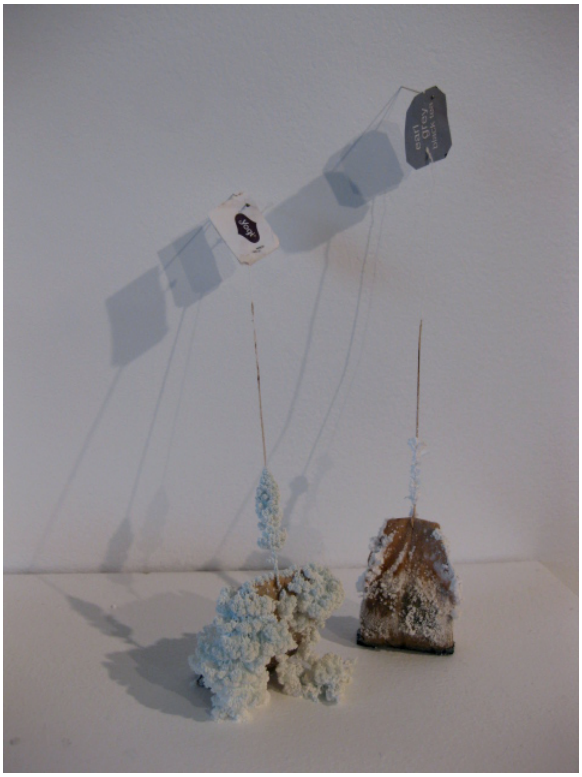
One example from this body of work is *Identifying with Geological Change* (2013) [images 10-13]. The idea for this piece came at the start of my final semester, after

reading that our fingernails grow at the same rate that tectonic plates move (Fortey 77). Intrigued by this, I incised two dry point lines into the nail bed of my left thumb near the cuticle. Over the remaining months of my graduate experience, I made a daily ritual of inking the incised lines intaglio style and taking an indexical impression of my thumbnail in pebble-size bits of clay, then stamping the reverse side with the correlating date. I continued this process until the lines diverged completely off the end of my fingernail. The clay pebbles not only made the passage of geological time, a vast and somewhat incomprehensible change, relatable on a personal and intimate level, but they also became a constant reminder of the progress I was making towards the end of my graduate school chapter in life. The last thumbnail impression unexpectedly coincided with the ending of my graduate studies and was made the opening day of my MFA thesis exhibition.

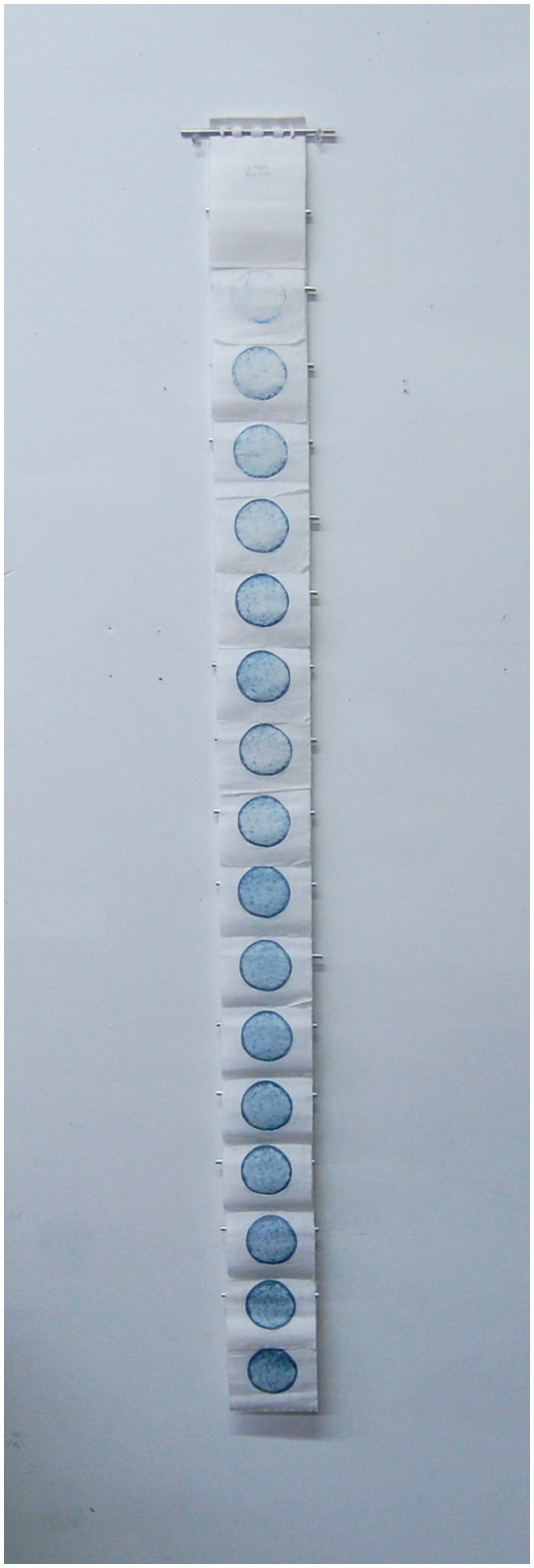
Through a gradual process of immersion and exposure to new knowledge and experiences I can look back and see the changes I have undergone during my time at Herron. By watching the cycles of nature we can understand more fully the cycles of our own lives. Each stage we go through has its time of fulfillment and recession, as do all things. Sometimes parts of us must die before another part can come to life. When we can see the wisdom contained in the small movement of tectonic plates pushing together to form mountains, we can begin to see it everywhere.

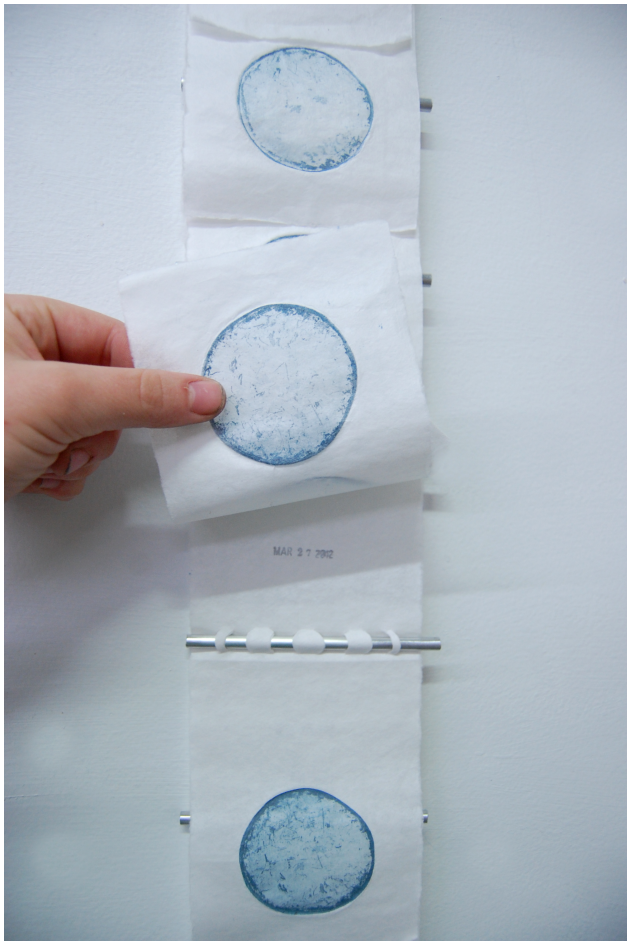
Nothing in the world is at rest. Cells of living organisms divide and multiply as the surface of the earth continues to dilate and collapse. We too will continue to change both physically and mentally as we move from one phase of life to the next. Whether these transformations are quick, painful, subtle, or fulfilling, the fluctuations in life are

something we can count on. Each moment that comes and goes is the very essence of the pulsating ebb and flow of life.



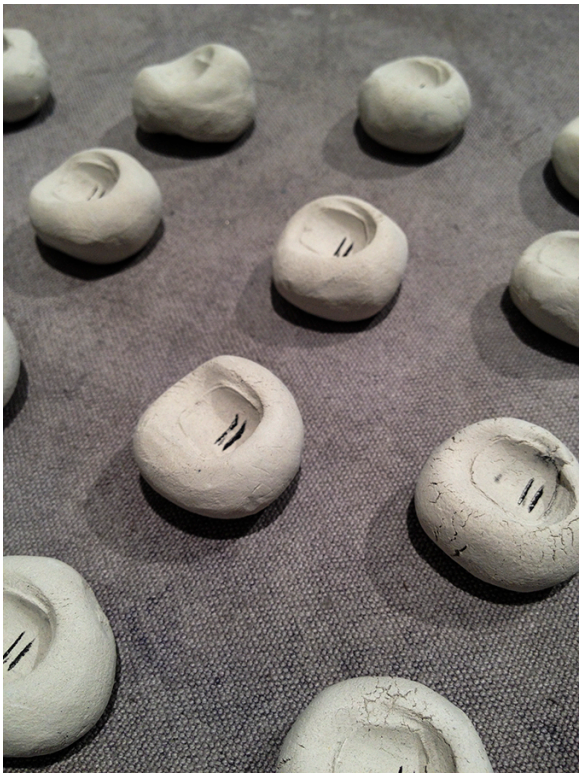
Images 1-4 *Salt Studies: Exploring nature's flux*





Images 5-7 *A Trace Over Time*

Images 8-9 *Shoreline*



Images 10-13 *Identifying with Geological Change*

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